

# Death Brings Down the House

By Larry Holden



*Once again Binnie Bailey's name was up in lights. Once more applause filled the theater. But suddenly Death took the spotlight—and starred in the crimson curtain call.*

**S**HE had never been beautiful, and now what was left of her flamboyant charm lay huddled and smashed on

the sidewalk. The hotel roof was a long way up, and she had come all the way down, her shriek streaming behind her like the tail of a

comet. The crowd bubbled around her. Binnie Bailey had made a dramatic exit—but there was no applause, no whistling, no stamping of feet, no cheering.

And there were no encores.

The detective from headquarters slapped his hand with the folded theater program and scowled down at it. His name was O’Grady and he looked it—red hair, freckles and a bulldog jaw, a tough cop. Only this time he didn’t look so tough; he just looked unhappy.

The program said:

BINNIE BAILEY  
in  
“EARLY TO RISE”  
With Joey Coy  
Produced by  
Sam Bennett

Sam Bennett sat hunched on the edge of the bed in his hotel room, his hands dangling between his plump thighs. He had a round face, plump cheeks and blue eyes, a face made for jollity. He, too, looked unhappy. As did the miniature, cigar-smoking comedian, Joey Coy, who restlessly prowled the room, touching everything in it, lifting lamps, moving chairs, looking behind the very pictures on the walls. Even on the stage, Joey Coy was never still for a minute.

Sam made a weary gesture with his hands and looked up at O’Grady. “It’s a serious thing, calling it suicide, lieutenant,” he said reproachfully. “How can you tell it was suicide? Did she have a sign around her neck? There are things to consider.”

Joey Coy poised for a moment, waved his heavy cane and squeaked, “The insurance!” He glowered at O’Grady, then trotted across the room and peered into the wastebasket.

“Comes suicide,” said Sam, “comes no insurance.”

O’Grady raised his head and said sharply, “You two seem to have got yourselves in an uproar over the insurance. How come?”

Sam protested, “Not for us, lieutenant. It’s for Binnie’s little girl. She’s with the show too. Ten thousand is a lot of money.”

With gloomy amazement, O’Grady watched Joey Coy empty the wastebasket on the rug and poke through it with his cane. He shook himself and looked back at Sam Bennett.

“I’ll look at it your way for a minute,” he said. “If it wasn’t suicide, what was she doing up on the roof at this time of night?”

Joey Coy screamed, “She *liked* roofs!”

Sam was again the interpreter. “Always after opening night Binnie goes up on the roof, sits on the edge and swings her legs. It quiets her down, she says. She feels like she was flying right up into the sky, and the sky, she says, is the most peaceful thing there is. Anyway,” he pointed out, “why should she do the dutch? She comes out of retirement and everybody says, don’t do it, Binnie, you’re too old.

“So what happens? She’s a hit. On top of that, she owns twenty-five percent of the show, and the show’s a hit, too. Ten weeks already we’re sold out in New York, and we just opened in Newark. We killed them in Newark opening night. We killed them in Buffalo, and we killed them in Albany. We’ll kill them in New York.” His face twitched. “Would have,” he amended.

Joey Coy interrupted savagely, “We’ll kill them in New York. Look, Sam, I got it all figured out. I take over most of Binnie’s business in all three acts. I dress up like a dame and come out and do her songs. I’ll be sensational!”

Sam looked resigned, hopeless. He moved his hands about a quarter of an inch. “We hope,” he muttered.

“I’ll kill them,” Joey told O’Grady. “Ask Sam. He knows. I’ve been in his last

fifteen turkeys.”

“Now, Joey, be serious. Please.”

Joey was serious. “Ten turkeys,” he said. He picked a scrap of cloth from the wastebasket, admired it and thrust it into his pocket. He turned around and looked at Sam. “I’ll tell you what,” he said. “I’m going to bed.” He trotted out of the room.

Sam caught O’Grady’s puzzled glance. “You don’t want to mind Joey,” he said. “All he ever thinks of is the show, and he’s always picking up props, like that wastebasket business. He finds the damndest things and makes them look funny. To me. On the stage his stuff’s getting a little familiar. He can’t carry the show in New York.

“I’ll have to get a new lead,” he went on despondently. “Someone like Merman. Someone you can hang a show on and she carries it. Did you see Binnie? Terrific! She carried the show. Without her it’s just another turkey. Ten weeks in New York and we fold. She was as good as Merman. I thought I had a winner this time. Haven’t had one in years. And I’m tired of turkeys.” Sam had aged.

O’GRADY had the program all smoothed out in the palm of his hand and he was staring at it thoughtfully. “Maybe it wasn’t suicide,” he conceded. “How many people knew she went up on the roof all the time?”

“Comparatively speaking, nobody. There are over a hundred million people in the country, and only a hundred of us knew about it.” His eyes suddenly flew wide with thought. “What’s that again? You mean, she was pushed?” he said incredulously.

“You’ve eliminated all the reasons for suicide, haven’t you?”

“Yes, but I didn’t say—”

“I’m saying it. I’m saying it’s a possibility that has to be looked into. This daughter of Binnie Bailey’s, for instance.

She gets that quarter interest in the show now, doesn’t she?”

“And what’s it worth? Strictly the neck of the turkey.”

“Is she a talented kid?”

“Talented? How should I know? Maybe she could cook.”

“In other words, she couldn’t carry the show in Binnie Bailey’s place. Is that the idea?”

“She couldn’t carry programs for the show. For ten weeks maybe people come because she’s Nora Bailey, Binnie’s kid. She sings and she understudied. Binnie wanted it that way. Between you and me, lieutenant, that little girl didn’t want any part of the show. Of any show. She’s strictly from mustard. Talent? No talent. But Binnie snapped the whip and the kid’s on the stage, hating it. Only because she loves her mother.”

O’Grady accepted the last statement as propaganda. “I think I’ll have a little talk with her,” he said. He folded the program and put it in his pocket.

Sam went to the door with him, his shoulders sagging, his eyes mournful. “I should talk to you some more,” he said. “Binnie didn’t jump, and she wasn’t pushed. She fell. You’ll see.” He shook hands solemnly with O’Grady before closing the door.

And the moment it closed, the door of the room beside it opened and Joey Coy skipped out, looking like a musical comedy conspirator. He put his finger to his lips, rolled his eyes and beckoned O’Grady into his room.

Inside, he stood close to the detective and whispered, “The old man.” He prodded O’Grady’s stomach with his forefinger, winked significantly.

O’Grady said, “What old man?”

“What old man!” Joey Coy looked surprised, “Nora’s old man, the guy Binnie was hitched with. Stuck with. A souse. He

follows the show around like a bad debt.”

He stepped back and interestedly riffled through a wallet he held in his hand. Startled, O’Grady recognized the badge pinned to it and snatched it from the comedian’s hand.

“Another stunt like that,” he said grimly, “and you’ll be wearing your ears in your pocket. Now cut the comedy and stop hinting around. What about this old man?”

Joey Coy grinned impishly. “A souse, see? A barfly.” He staggered in a circle around O’Grady, illustrating a drunk. Any other time it might have been funny. “What happens is this.” He poked at O’Grady’s stomach again and the detective stepped back. “What happens is this, whenever he thinks Binnie is looking the other way, he comes to the stage door and mooches a sawbuck from Nora.

“Last night Binnie catches him promoting his buck, she bats him down to an inch and a half and they square off. ‘You’re ruining my daughter,’ he weeps. Tears run down his face.” Joey Coy shed a tear. “‘You’re ruining her reputation, you souse. Begone!’ Binnie says.” Joey struck a pose and pointed. a stern arm “‘Begone!’ The old man pleads, holds out his arms. ‘Give me back my daughter,’ he sobs. ‘I’ll reform. I’ll show her how to lead a normal life. She will be happy and married with kids.’ Binnie curls a scornful lip and turns her back. ‘You’ll be sorry,’ he shrieks—”

O’Grady interrupted impatiently, “Never mind the act. Where can I find this guy?”

Joey Coy stopped grinning and suddenly, despite his funny cigar and out-sized cane, he looked normal. “I’m not as screwy as I seem, lieutenant,” he said in a natural voice. “It’s a habit I get into. I think it would be a good idea if you looked up Nora’s father, Right now I think you’ll find him in the Star Hotel over on Mulberry Street, a flophouse. He’ll be soused, but

there are ways around that.”

Then, as if regretting his temporary sanity, he reached into his pocket and put on a pair of enormous black-rimmed glasses. “I’ll have other ideas from time to time,” he announced importantly. “Make me an offer.”

O’Grady left.

**N**ORA BAILEY, Binnie’s daughter, was in Room 304, and O’Grady found her in exactly the condition he had expected, for she had seen the body. She was lying stiffly in bed, as mute as a tombstone and just as colorless. Her eyes were dark, wide and fixed, and the tears welled up in them, rolled down her cheeks and fell unchecked to the pillow as steadily as the ticking of the clock on the night table.

A motherly looking woman bustled indignantly across the room as O’Grady entered, but before she could loose the tirade that was bursting at her lips, he showed his badge.

“You couldn’t wait,” she said bitterly. “Look at her. She’s in no condition.” O’Grady could see the girl was in no condition. But that was all the better from his angle, if there was something to be dug for.

The bathroom door opened and out stepped one of the handsomest men O’Grady had ever laid eyes on.

He was six feet tall, had a lean, tanned face, wide shoulders and slim hips. But on second glance he fell to pieces. His eyes were too close, his mouth too small and his nose too long and predatory. His smile didn’t reach his eyes by inches.

He looked arrogantly at O’Grady and said, “Yes?”

“Mr. Tony Reagan,” the motherly woman said drily to O’Grady. “The juvenile lead in the show. For fifteen years now he’s a juvenile. In the show I’m his mother. I should be found dead. He’s got the girl

mesmerized, the Svengali." Then sweetly, "This is a policeman, Mr. Reagan, not a reporter. You can go back into the bathroom and uncomb your hair."

Reagan smiled thinly at O'Grady. "Quaint old guernsey, isn't she?" he drawled. "I'm Miss Bailey's fiancee."

The woman said darkly, "See?"

O'Grady's eyes flickered from the silent, sorrowing girl to Reagan's shallow face. Reagan ran his hand over his hair and straightened his tie, and he was very fond of his fingernails.

"I protest," he said unconvincingly. "I protest against your disturbing Miss Bailey at a time like this."

O'Grady murmured, "You don't say."

The woman muttered, "The hell he doesn't. He says all the time. Binnie had a word for him. Phonograph needle. If you don't mind, I think I'll go back to my room and get sick." She gave Reagan a venomous glance and marched out of the room.

O'Grady lifted a cigarette to his lips. "On second thought," he said, "maybe I won't disturb Miss Bailey. I just wanted a little information, that's all. Perhaps you'd help me, Mr. Reagan?"

Reagan was flattered. His vanity was colossal. He accepted this as a tribute to his intelligence. "Gladly," he said graciously.

"Suppose we hash it up over a cup of coffee?"

"Delighted, Mr.—ah—?"

"Just call me Chief."

Reagan had been in Newark exactly twenty-four hours, O'Grady for twenty-four years, but it was Reagan who showed O'Grady where to get the best coffee in town. *He* said. It was good coffee, almost half as good as the coffee O'Grady was accustomed to drinking at Mike's Lunch, across the street from headquarters. He wagged his spoon in his cup as if to stir some life into it.

"I suppose," he said thoughtfully,

"you'll be marrying Miss Bailey now."

"Oh, not immediately, Chief—ah—?"

"O'Grady."

"Not immediately, Chief O'Grady. One has to observe a decent period of mourning, doesn't one?"

"Naturally, naturally. You know, a handsome guy like you, Reagan—how come you and the little lady didn't tie it up before this?"

Reagan's small mouth thinned. "If it had been up to me, Chief O'Grady—"

O'Grady nodded sympathetically. "The mother, eh?"

"A termagant, a virago, a fishwife. Meaning, of course," Reagan added on hurriedly, "no disrespect to the dead."

"Of course not," O'Grady agreed. "Opposed to the match, eh?"

"Opposed to everything. The merest suggestion she opposed. For instance, she made the show the rowdy free-for-all it is. How often I said to Mr. Bennett. 'Mr. Bennett,' I pleaded with him, 'the public is tired of these musical fist-fights. They want something romantic and nostalgic.'"

O'Grady's spoon kept stirring and stirring, but he hadn't touched the coffee. Reagan's story seemed to fascinate him. "That romantic angle," he observed. "I'll bet you could handle that in a breeze."

"Naturally." It was a statement of fact embroidered with no false modesty. "And I'm pretty sure you'll see some changes in the show before we reach New York. Miss Bailey owns twenty-five percent interest, and she'll have something to say about it. We'll throw out all the slapstick, including that gruesome little comedian, Joey Coy. I can't look at him without reaching for the Lysol."

"You and Miss Bailey will play the romantic leads?"

"Naturally."

"Talented little girl, I hear."

"Beautiful talent, Chief O'Grady."

Beautiful. Fragile, dainty . . .”

“Nostalgic? Romantic?”

“More sentimental than romantic. I’ve been coaching her. When her mother wasn’t around, of course. That was another thing she opposed. She was ruining the girl. Binnie,” he added maliciously, “belonged strictly to the semaphore school of acting.”

O’Grady pushed back his untasted cup of coffee and stood. “I won’t keep you any longer, Mr. Reagan. As a representative of the police department, I’d like to offer my profound gratitude for your assistance.”

Reagan beamed.

O’GRADY stopped in the corner cigar store and called headquarters. “I’m going over to the Star Hotel on Mulberry Street. Have the boys get there before me and cover all exits. You know how it is when a cop walks into that flea bag.”

The clerk at the desk turned pale when O’Grady plodded across the murky lobby. They were old acquaintances.

“A guy named Bailey,” O’Grady said without preliminaries.

The clerk fumbled with the register. O’Grady cocked his ear and delightedly listened for the familiar sounds. They came—a scamper of furtive feet down the back hallways, a scuffling of feet, curses at the doors. The boys had the exits covered. The clerk also heard it.

He wet his lips and said, “Room 211,” and seemed ready to duck.

O’Grady moved, unhurried, toward the stairs. If Bailey had run, it might mean something. But Bailey hadn’t run.

He lay open-eyed on his crummy bed, his hands clasped behind his head. He jumped up when O’Grady walked through the doorway.

O’Grady said, “Sit down,” and showed his badge again. He leaned against the door as Bailey slowly sank back.

Bailey’s mouth twisted. “She really

meant it,” he said bitterly. “She really did sic the cops on me. She said she would.”

“Your wife—Binnie Bailey?”

“She said she would, but she’s ruining my kid. I couldn’t stay away. I know I’m not much good, but tonight I made up my mind to lay off the bottle. See, I’m sober. I’m going to get a job. Publicity. I used to be one of the best. I can do it again. Maybe if I show her I can take care of Nora.”

O’Grady said abruptly, “Your wife’s dead, Bailey.”

Bailey’s hands and shoulders jerked. He said, “Good!” then mumbled, “God forgive me.”

“She was pushed off the hotel roof. How long have you been in your room?”

Bailey’s hands shivered. “A half hour,” he said in a muffled voice. He blurted desperately, “I was walking down by the river, taking a good look at myself, making up my mind to pull myself out of it. I’m not something to be proud of. I panhandle my own kid for liquor money. I want to help Nora. . .”

“How are you going to help Nora?”

“She doesn’t belong on the stage. She never belonged on the stage, but Binnie trained her for it since the cradle. It—I guess it would have broken Binnie to bits if the kid ever quit. She couldn’t face it that Nora was no good and was just eating her heart out. She wants to live like other girls—if she’s still able.”

O’Grady said, “Hmrrrrrr,” and polished his nails on his lapel. “I hear you had quite a scrap with your wife tonight.”

“We always scrapped when we saw each other. Always. Not just tonight.”

“But tonight was kind of special, wasn’t it?”

BAILEY sat up and looked steadily at O’Grady. “Am I under arrest?” he asked. “You can take me in. It doesn’t make any difference to me. I don’t give a damn. I

didn't kill her. She's dead and the kid's free to go as she pleases. That's all that counts." He swung his legs over the side of the bed. "I'll be dressed in a minute."

O'Grady watched him cynically as he fumbled with his shoes.

"You know," he observed, "I never saw a guy so anxious as you to get himself pinched. Most guys'd be jumping out the window to get away from it. Maybe you're just queer. Or, on the other hand, maybe you know something I don't know. Could that be it, Bailey?"

Bailey looked up with a shoe in his hand. He said stupidly, "What was that?" as if he hadn't heard all of it.

"I said, you're in a hell of a rush to get yourself tossed in the clink."

"I'm not in a rush. You said you were arresting me."

"*You* said that," O'Grady pointed out. "You told me I was arresting you, and the next thing I knew you were jumping into your clothes like an overslept fireman. I just wanted to know, how come? It didn't seem natural. I'm not used to it. You'd do anything for your daughter, wouldn't you, Bailey?"

"Except stay sober."

"That was then. I mean now. Suppose you got the screwy idea she was mixed up in the murder somewhere. You'd break a leg to crucify yourself for her. See what I mean?"

Bailey dropped the shoe. "No," he whispered, horror-stricken. "You don't think that! You don't think Nora—"

O'Grady said mildly, "I said it was a screwy idea, didn't I?" He opened the door. "Hang around awhile. I may drop in tomorrow."

Bailey darted from the bed and grasped O'Grady's arm. "Wait a minute," he pleaded. "You've got Nora all wrong. She didn't have anything to do with it. She couldn't. She loved Binnie. That's the

reason she stayed on the stage all these years. She'd do anything for Binnie. Honestly, she'd—"

O'Grady pushed him gently back into the room. "Go to bed," he said. "And if I find you drunk in the morning, I will throw you in the can."

He closed the door. He looked thoughtfully at it, rubbed his chin, then turned toward the stairs, shaking his head.

O'Grady was at the morning rehearsal of the *Early To Rise* cast the next day. The cast moved listlessly, conscious that the ax had fallen. Nora Bailey was pale but composed. Tony Reagan was at her side constantly, talking, arguing, impatiently tossing his dark curls—and getting nowhere. The pianist poked woodenly at the keyboard. It sounded like a dirge. At last Sam Bennett climbed to the stage and made a sad little speech. He looked like a pink baby, ruthlessly deprived of his bottle.

"I know it's going to be tough without Binnie in there, kids," he said, "but we got a great little comedian in Joey Coy, and Joey's going to be giving all he's got, and you know that's plenty. I want you to back him to the hilt. Do that and we'll have the sparklingest little musical that ever hit Broadway." He waved his hand and climbed down to the auditorium and sat beside O'Grady in the fifth row.

The stage cleared, the piano tinkled out the cue, and Joey Coy, cigar and all, dashed out, crouching low, dragging a dressmaker's dummy at the end of a rope. He turned, looked surprised, then leaped on the dummy, winding his arms around it.

"At last, Hortense!" he screamed. "At last we are alone. Tell me that you will never leave me. Say that you'll be mine forever. I missed the last payment on you, and the finance company's at my throat."

The rehearsal was on.

O'Grady whispered, "Where'd he get that thing from? It looks like my

grandmother, bustle and all.”

“From an ash can, maybe. From the gutter, from the city dumps. Heaven knows where he gets his props from. He never stops looking. Great little comedian. Look at that. Nobody but Joey Coy would think of a thing like that and make it funny.”

Joey had pulled a phony pig’s head from a burlap sack and had spiked it atop the dummy. He gave it a horrified glance and shrieked.

“You don’t love me! Don’t speak. I can see it in your face.”

O’Grady didn’t think it very funny.

As a matter of fact, he couldn’t make head or tail of the whole rehearsal. It looked like hash to him. The director never let a song be sung through to its end, the dancers pattered on for a few steps, stopped and started all over again. Tony Reagan didn’t have a good voice, but it was certainly one of the loudest O’Grady had ever heard. The whole thing looked and sounded like rush hour in the subway.

And Nora Bailey. The kindest thing that could be said of her was that she was miscast, but no matter what part she took, it would have been a miss. She moved like a well-trained terrier, and the job she turned in was just as human.

But Sam Bennett seemed more and more pleased as the rehearsal clattered on. “It’s got a chance,” he whispered to O’Grady. “It’s got better than a chance.”

O’Grady said frankly, “It looks lousy to me.”

Sam was hurt. “But all rehearsals look lousy. Come and see it tonight.”

“Thanks. “

**A**S SAM had promised, the finished show did look different. It was smooth and polished, but it lacked sparkle. The songs were ordinary and the dancing usual. O’Grady watched from the wings, and by the end of the second act he could tell it was

headed for the warehouse. The applause was as thin as Sahara rain.

Joey Coy was working like a beaver. He clambered over furniture, ran up the scenery and produced an endless amount of garbage from his pockets.

He got one laugh when he ran into Tony Reagan and they both fell over the sofa and disappeared. It was a laugh of sheer gratitude.

As the second curtain came down, Joey Coy ran into the wings, sweating. He panted to O’Grady, “It can’t live without Binnie. Right now it’s strictly from cheese.”

“Sam Bennett doesn’t seem to think so.”

Joey turned to look at Sam, who was noisily congratulating everyone as they came from the stage. “He knows,” Joey said. “He’s been in the business long enough to know what a turkey smells like.” He hesitated, then said in a low voice, “I got something for you.”

He dug under his costume and brought out a small handkerchief, smeared with orange lipstick. “Orange,” he pointed out. “Binnie had orange hair and had all her lipstick made special to match.”

O’Grady said drily, “You had your back turned to Sam at the time, but I saw you pick it up. What were you saving it for?”

Joey shrugged. “Self-protection, Jack. I had a chance to put the show on its feet, and I wasn’t going to throw any monkeys. I’ve been slipping for too long, and this was a chance to show stuff, but I guess there ain’t none left no more.”

“Would you have turned this over to me if the show had gone over?”

“Don’t ask me, Jack. If you saw me pick it up, you know what that nose rag means.”

“Yep, but I don’t see how it helps. I’ve known who the killer is for quite awhile, but pinning it on him is a different thing. She must have been in his room last night when she dropped this handkerchief. What were they doing—scrapping?”

"Like they was married. The walls are thin in that hotel, Jack. I could hear."

O'Grady said, "You're going to do something for me, Joey, and if it turns out, I'll forget you suppressed evidence. Now listen . . ."

Joey listened.

THE roof was dark, illuminated only by the reflection from the harsh neon lights from the street far below. From where he stood at the chimney, O'Grady saw Joey Coy only as a hunched silhouette on the parapet, and beside him a heavy, round-shouldered figure. Their voices were low, but distinct.

"Another turkey," Joey was saying.

Sam Bennett's voice protested, "You can't tell yet, Joey."

"I can, and you can. We gotta make changes, Sam."

"No changes. It goes as it stands."

"You sound as if you want it to flop, Sam."

"Don't talk like a screwball."

"In fact, Sam, I'll put it this way. I know you want it to flop, for the same reason all your other turkeys flopped. I know how you financed the show, Sam. It came to me tonight when I saw how you had deliberately ruined this one. It came to me that all your shows were alike. You sold about five hundred percent of this one, Sam. You're a slick talker, you make a lot of contacts, and years ago you had a hit or two. You sold big chunks of it to about twenty-five guys, subtracted the cost of production and pocketed the difference. Then you set out to make sure it flopped. You're a crook, Sam."

O'Grady saw Bennett step back from the parapet and heard him say dangerously, "You're a screwball. You always were a screwball."

"Was Binnie Bailey a screwball, too? She knew you were needling the show. She had dough sunk in it and she got sore. That's why she scrapped with you last night."

"What's on your mind, Joey?" Bennett purred.

"You killed Binnie, Sam. Not because she scrapped with you, but because she was making a success of the show. You didn't expect that when you put her in the lead—an old has-been like Binnie. And if she put the show in the big-money brackets, you were going to have one sweet time when all those guys came around for their twenty-five percents of the profits. You know what I'm going to do to show you up, Sam? I'm going to put an ad in *Variety*. I'm going to say, 'Special meeting of the backers of *Early To Rise* will be held in—' "

Bennett lunged with his arms thrust before him. Joey Coy's legs flew up and he disappeared over the edge of the roof. Sam turned and stumbled toward the stairway. O'Grady stepped from beside the chimney and turned on his flash.

He snapped, "Hold it, Bennett!"

Sam gave him a glance of pure terror and threw up his hands as if to warp off the searching, accusing finger of light. Then, with a shriek, he turned and sprang headfirst over the parapet. O'Grady jogged across the roof and peered over the ledge, grinning.

One story down, Joey Coy and Bennett were floundering in the safety net O'Grady'd had the fire department string up for him. Sam clawed toward the edge of the net and, as O'Grady yelled, Joey raised his heavy cane and brought it down heavily on that shining, bald head. Then, reverting, he reached over and flicked an invisible speck of dust from it.